

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

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SUBJECT: DETERIORATING SITUATION AT VELLORE MEDICAL COLLEGE AND
HOSPITAL

SUMMARY

THE CHRISTIAN MEDICAL COLLEGE AND HOSPITAL AT VELLORE, AN
AMERICAN-FOUNDED INSTITUTION WITH A WORLDWIDE REPUTATION
ESPECIALLY IN TROPICAL DISEASES, IS BEING SUBJECTED TO INCREAS-
ING PRESSURE BY THE TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT WHICH COULD RESULT
IN ITS CLOSURE. THESE PRESSURES HAVE ARISEN FROM CHIEF MINISTER
KARUNANIDHI'S FIRM ALIGNMENT WITH HIS OWN DMK PARTY-CONTROLLED
TRADE UNIONS IN THEIR CONFRONTATION WITH THE CMC MANAGEMENT
OVER THE FATE OF 15 SUB-PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES DISMISSED FOR
INDISCIPLINE AND INSTIGATION OF VIOLENCE FOLLOWING A SERIES OF
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STRIKES PROTESTING THE DISMISSAL OF A STAFF DOCTOR AND OTHERS

FOR ACCEPTING BRIBES FOR CHANGING GRADES ON MEDICAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS. WHEN THE CHIEF MINISTER'S UNSOLICITED SETTLEMENT PROPOSAL (THAT THE 15 SHOULD BE TAKEN BACK) WAS NOT ACCEPTED BY THE CMC MANAGEMENT, THE CHIEF MINISTER PRIVATELY THREATENED TO CLOSE THE HOSPITAL DOWN, AND THE LAST 10 DAYS HAVE WITNESSED SEVERAL ACTS BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT DESIGNED TO PRESSURE THE HOSPITAL MANAGEMENT INTO CAPITULATION OR CLOSURE. ALTHOUGH POLICE PROTECTION TO THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF (INCLUDING SEVERAL AMERICANS) AND LOYAL WORKERS HAS THUS FAR BEEN ADEQUATE, THERE IS A GROWING RISK OF RENEWED VIOLENCE AS THE SITUATION CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE AND WE HAVE MADE REPRESENTATIONS TO STATE OFFICIALS TO ENSURE POLICE PROTECTION TO AMERICAN NATIONALS.

1. THE CURRENT DISPUTE ORIGINATED WHEN AN INDIAN DOCTOR AND FOUR OTHER STAFF MEMBERS WERE FOUND TO HAVE TAKEN BRIBES TO UPGRADE MEDICAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION RESULTS. WHEN THE CMC MANAGEMENT REFUSED TO DROP THE INVESTIGATION, THE DMK-CONTROLLED UNION OF HOSPITAL WORKERS (WHICH IS HEADED BY A BROTHER OF THE ACCUSED DOCTOR) WENT ON STRIKE ON JUNE 18, 1974 DURING WHICH THERE WAS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY AND ASSAULT ON SOME STAFF MEMBERS. THE STRIKE WAS RENEWED JUNE 21, AGAIN WITH VIOLENCE. THE PERPETRATORS AND INSTIGATORS OF VIOLENCE WERE IDENTIFIED AND 18 WERE SUSPENDED. A FURTHER STRIKE OCCURRED ON OCTOBER 24, WITH MORE VIOLENCE, IN AN EFFORT TO FORCE THE MANAGEMENT TO DROP ALL CHARGES AGAINST BOTH THE BRIBE-TAKERS AND THE VIOLENCE-INSTIGATORS. WHEN MANAGEMENT CONTINUED TO REFUSE TO DROP CHARGES, THE UNION LAUNCHED A LIGHTNING STRIKE ON JANUARY 5

PARALYZING THE WORK OF THE ENTIRE HOSPITAL. THE MANAGEMENT TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE STRIKE TO FIRE OUTRIGHT 15 OF THE 18 EMPLOYEES SUSPENDED IN JUNE 1974. THE STRIKE CONTINUES, BUT THERE HAS BEEN A GENERALLY ADEQUATE POLICE PRESENCE AND THE HOSPITAL HAS GRADUALLY WORKED ITS WAY BACK TO ABOUT 70 PERCENT OF NORMAL ACTIVITY.

2. CHIEF MINISTER KARUNANIDHI INTERVENED PERSONALLY FEBRUARY 1 AND PROPOSED A "COMPROMISE" SETTLEMENT UNDER WHICH THE CMC MANAGEMENT COULD LET STAND THE FIVE DISMISSALS FOR CORRUPTION BUT SHOULD TAKE BACK THE 15 EMPLOYEES DISMISSED FOR VIOLENCE. THE CMC REFUSAL TO ACCEPT THE PROPOSAL (ON LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE GROUNDS THAT IT WOULD UNDERMINE DISCIPLINE AND MORALE ESPECIALLY AMONG THE BULK OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF WHICH HAS STRONGLY SUPPORTED MANAGEMENT'S POSITION) LED THE CHIEF MINISTER TO PUBLICLY DENOUNCE THE CMC FOR ITS "ADAMANCY" AND TO PRIVATELY THREATEN TO PUT THE CMC OUT OF BUSINESS UNLESS IT ACCEPTS HIS PROPOSAL. DURING THE LAST TEN DAYS THE GOVERNMENT HAS SHARPLY STEPPED UP ITS PRESSURE ON THE CMC: THE DISTRICT COLLECTOR WHO HAS IMPARTIALLY DISCHARGED HIS RESPONSIBILITIES

FOR LAW AND ORDER HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED, THE INSTITUTION HAS

RECEIVED A BILL FOR RS. 585,000 FOR "POLICE PROTECTION" SINCE JANUARY 5; THE CMC HAS BEEN ORDERED TO PRODUCE ITS FINANCIAL RECORDS AND HAS BEEN THREATENED WITH TAXES FOR THE FIRST TIME; THE HOSPITAL HAS BEEN ORDERED TO PULL DOWN ITS 70-YEAR OLD COMPOUND WALL ON THE GROUNDS THAT IT JUTS INTO THE PUBLIC HIGHWAY. IN ADDITION, POLICE PROTECTION HAS BEEN REDUCED AND ON MARCH 10 THE ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, THE CMC SECURITY OFFICER AND THREE CMC SECURITY GUARDS WERE ARRESTED (BUT LATER RELEASED ON BAIL).

3. THE CMC MANAGEMENT HAS SO FAR DONE A SKILLFUL JOB IN PUBLICLY PRESENTING ITS CASE AND HAS WON WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR ITS STAND. (THERE IS GREAT RESPECT THROUGHOUT SOUTH INDIA FOR THIS INSTITUTION, FOUNDED IN 1900 BY A MEDICAL MISSIONARY OF THE REFORMED CHURCH OF AMERICA, WHICH HAS GROWN INTO A SOPHISTICATED MEDICAL COMPLEX OF 1200 BEDS, 400 DOCTORS, 400 NURSES, 500 MEDICAL STUDENTS, AND MORE THAN 2000 OUT-PATIENTS DAILY). OPPOSITION PARTIES IN THE STATE ASSEMBLY HAVE ACCUSED THE GOVERNMENT OF PLAYING POLITICS WITH THE ISSUE, AND EVEN SOME IN THE DMK (SUCH AS THE LOCAL M.P. AND THE DEPUTY LEADER OF THE LEGISLATIVE PARTY) HAVE PUBLICLY SUPPORTED THE CMC. THE CMC MANAGEMENT HAS ALSO PRESENTED ITS CASE TO MRS. GANDHI WHO REPORTEDLY HAS INDICATED HER DESIRE TO SEE THE STANDARDS AND REPUTATION OF CMC MAINTAINED. THE CMC HAS ALSO MADE EFFECTIVE USE OF THE THREAT OF MOST OF ITS FOREIGN DOCTORS TO LEAVE IF CORRUPTION AND INDISCIPLINE ARE CONDONED.

4. WHY KARUNANIDHI HAS CHOSEN TO PUT HIS OWN PRESTIGE SO SQUARELY ON THE LINE IN SUCH A DUBIOUS CAUSE IS NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR. HE IS OBVIOUSLY UNDER STRONG PRESSURE TO SATISFY THE DMK TRADE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UNIONS. THERE IS ALSO A MAJOR UNDERCURRENT OF TAMIL-MALAYALEE RIVALRY IN THE SITUATION AT CMC (KARUNANIDHI HAS PUBLICLY CHARGED THAT CMC IS RUN BY "ONE LINGUISTIC GROUP", I.E. MALAYALEES) AND, GIVEN KARUNANIDHI'S INCREASING EFFORTS TO PRESENT HIMSELF AS A PROTECTOR OF TAMIL INTERESTS IN THE FACE OF THE CHALLENGE FROM HIS RIVAL, M.G. RAMACHANDRAM, THIS FACTOR HAS PROBABLY FIGURED IN HIS REACTION. HE IS PROBABLY ALSO MIFFED THAT, FOR THE FIRST TIME, HIS PERSONAL PROPOSALS FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF A LABOR DISPUTE HAVE NOT BEEN ACCEPTED BY MANAGEMENT. HE ALSO APPEARS TO HAVE UNDERESTIMATED THE DETERMINATION OF THE CMC MANAGEMENT TO RESIST PRESSURES WHICH IT BELIEVES WILL UNDERMINE ITS ABILITY TO OPERATE INDEPENDENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY, (CMC HAS ALMOST NO FINANCIAL DEPENDENCE ON GOVERNMENT. IT SUBSISTS ON FEES AND CONTRIBUTIONS, INCLUDING SUBSTANTIAL DONATIONS FROM VARIOUS AMERICAN CHURCHES).

5. IN VIEW OF THE POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE IN THE VELLORE SITUATION, WE HAVE BEEN KEEPING IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH THE AMERICANS AT CMC AND THE BRITISH DEPUTY HIGH COMMISSIONER AND I HAVE MADE REPRESENTATIONS TO THE TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT TO INSURE ADEQUATE POLICE PROTECTION FOR OUR NATIONALS. (THERE ARE ABOUT 30 AMERICANS INCLUDING DEPENDENTS IN VELLORE, OF WHOM 17 ARE ASSOCIATED WITH CMC). THE AMERICANS CONTINUE TO REPORT SATISFACTION WITH THE POLICE PROTECTION PROVIDED THEM SO FAR. ALTHOUGH THERE HAS BEEN SOME RECENT REDUCTION IN THE POLICE CONTINGENT AT CMC, IT APPEARS THAT THE GOVERNMENT FOR THE PRESENT IS EMPHASIZING OTHER HARASSMENT MEASURES TO FORCE A CAPITULATION BY THE CMC MANAGEMENT.

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